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V.S. Pritchett (1900-1997)

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interviewed by Ben Forkner and Philippe Séjourné, July 18, 1985, First published in *JSSE* n° 6, 1986

1 The following interview took place at V.S. Pritchett's home on Thursday, July 18, 1985. Because it was a weekday, and Camdem Town in London is a working-class town, the streets were almost deserted when we arrived. We were early, and walked over to Regent's Park to pass the time. For a man who delights in borders, and all sorts of subtle hesitations, sidesteppings, intrusions, and escapes, V.S. Pritchett's house stands helpfully in the midst of several distinct but watchful urban frontiers. From a quiet residential crescent of late Regency townhouses, he faces Regent's Park across a couple of busy roads and a railroad track. He wakes up to the sound of the animals in the Parks' well-stocked Zoo. The Park is a large green expanse, full of fields, thick untrimmed trees, and hidden paths. Behind his house lies Camden Town with its crowded blind alleys, its warehouses, and its shops where he does the afternoon's shopping. As if to insist on this crossing of realms, on the day of the interview a Spaniard had decided to put himself in one of the Zoo's cages as a stunt. He apparently attracted little attention, possibly because as Pritchett says, in the interview, most of the citizens are busy acting out their own private roles. We stopped in the Park just for a few minutes, time enough for tea and biscuits in an outside café not far from a field of dogwalkers. It was a warm afternoon and the Spaniard was perhaps asleep in his cage. There was no sound or sign of movement from that area of the Park. When we returned to Sir Victor's house, we deliberately walked past, thinking we were still early. As we turned back, there he was, having come outside to meet us, worried that we were confused. The interview took place in a comfortable living room, hung with paintings, mostly several remarkable, secretive green landscapes by a friend, Reynolds Stone, and dominated by a large glass case full of stuffed birds, a collection worthy of Pritchett's Uncle Arthur, but actually a gift of an old friend and editor. As the reader of the interview will sense, Pritchett's remarks are expansive and

inventive, often seeing in obvious questions hidden directions. We talked for well over two hours, having been given
"as much time as you want". We would like to thank Sir Victor not only for the generous and penetrating answers, but also for his hospitality, a kind welcome and relaxed atmosphere, and some excellent Bergerac wine.

Outside england

Ben FORKNER: My first question is about your early life and the way it stimulated your interest in the short story. I know that you first began reading and writing short stories when you were in Ireland.

V.S.PRITCHETT: That's true, yes. My beginning life was quite outside writing. I was a journalist and I was sent to Ireland during the Irish Civil War in the 20's after the Treaty when the two sides in the Rebellion fought each other, and I read a great deal of the Irish writers then such as Yeats, George Russell (A.E.), Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, in fact all those remarkable writers. They had all read the Russians, and there was a tremendous interest in literature in Ireland, Dublin has got splendid bookshops...

B.F.: You met Liam O'Flaherty?

V.S.P.: I met him, I knew him fairly well. I admired his stories and from that it seemed to me that this is the form of writing I should try and do myself, because up till then I had written nothing else but sketches, descriptions of places, that kind of thing, but not a complete story. He was of course very interested in Chekhov and D.H. Lawrence, so there was a double entry into the short story via Ireland. In England, I don't think I had even read any Kipling in my twenties, though all my elders knew him by heart. In fact it was much later that I read English short stories. But Hemingway's dialogue attracted me.

B.F.: And you've said it was a good period to begin writing short stories. There was an active interest, not only in Ireland, but...

V.S.P.: Well, everywhere. There was in England — D.H. Lawrence, for example and Katherine Mansfield — and of course in France. In Ireland, there was a link with the Abbey Theatre where they produced a large number of one-act plays, and the one-act play was the thing which was becoming extremely popular in Europe outside Ireland. Really the idea had come to Ireland from Europe. Such plays are of course a step to the writing of short stories: it's adjacent to it. That was my beginning. However what I wrote then was very short, not much more than anecdotes, with a slight poetic tendency to them, but still anecdotes. Even the plainest short story is a poem.

B.F.: Did you write them for publication?

V.S.P.: Yes, I tried to get them published. Indeed I wrote one "Rain in the Sierra," which was accepted in the paper called the *Irish Statesman* but never published. The paper went bust (laughter). Actually, I had travelled a good deal, you know, I had worked and lived in France, I then went to Dublin and to Spain. My first real published story of any scale: "Tragedy in Greek Theatre" was published in the Cornhill and it was thought well of. I thought, well, I must be getting better because I can get a long story published. This story was set in Taormina.

B.F.: One thing I noticed in going through your autobiographies is the importance of travelling and going across borders. You end *A Cab at the Door* with these words: "I am pretty sure that although I am often described as a traditional English writer any originality in my writing is due to my having a foreign mind." You started writing when you started crossing frontiers? And looking back on your life in England?

V.S.P.: Yes, I think this is true. I left school when I was sixteen and I had a very modest education, but the one thing I was rather good at was languages and I was longing to get abroad and to see other countries. And especially the notion of crossing from one frontier to the other, as I felt that I had crossed frontiers in English life too. I had crossed the frontier out of rather modest lower middle class circumstances into the company of rather intellectual people. This transition from class to class and from country to country was very liberating to me.

B.F.: And this is what you meant by being on the borderline when you write?

V.S.P.: Yes, I do feel that. I feel it's a break with absolute realism; you're crossing from one portion of the mind to another portion, from reality to the imagination. It's the stimulus of doing that, I think, which has been important to me. It still is.

B.F.: And at the same time you began talking about national character. You talk about the American South, somewhat, but mainly about the French character, the Spanish character, and the Irish character. In your stories too, people are often identified by their national character.

V.S.P.: Yes, I think that is so, though theories of national character are very shaky. When I was young I was enormously opposed to the notion that other nations were alien, therefore they were "wrong," or that is to say, they had mistaken ideas and habits which, as a matter of fact, quite a large number of my very young contemporaries — especially schoolboys — firmly believed. The kind of Englishman I didn't much care for in those days was the kind who automatically went out to Europe, to India, to places abroad. They had such conventional and distorted views of the people they were living among. And I thought that the only thing that would interest me if I went to these places were the people themselves, and not the English colony. I tend to think all foreigners are right. Ireland was a great test because after all the Ireland of that period had been fighting the British up to then. Like many English people I loved being in Ireland, and the British and the Irish privately got on enormously well together, and that was quite a revelation to me.

B.F.: Were they welcoming?

V.S.P.: Oh, enormously, enormously.

B.F.: You didn't know Yeats beforehand?

V.S.P.: No I didn't know Yeats beforehand, I'd read him of course. I didn't know any Irish people.

B.F.: James Stephens?

V.S.P.: Yes and Frank O'Connor later on. I didn't know any of these people before. But Dublin is a small city, it had an intellectual society; if you were a journalist, as I was then, it was very easy to know them, and I was passionately interested in them, and I found even the most anti-British Irish (nominally anti-British Irish) in Ireland, just after the war, were far from hostile; we were on the friendliest terms at once. I am capable of a little blarney myself — the Cockney kind!

B.F.:And this was during a war.

V.S.P.: It was actually during the Civil War, after the Treaty when Sinn Fein split.

Philippe SÉJOURNÉ:And in what year was that?

V.S.P.: That was in early 1922. The Rebellion was in 1916 and I had got to know some of the people in the Rebellion who were the most congenial company, especially the father of the present Prime Minister.

B.F.:I can't remember exactly where in your autobiography you say that the Irish are especially gifted in the short story, and in that way they're similar to American Southerners.

V.S.P.: The two societies had certain resemblances.

B.F.:Why do you think that's so?

V.S.P.: That's a very hard question to answer. I think there's a similarity between a certain kind of person in the American South who is very much like the Anglo-Irish gentry, and in fact there was something like an Anglo-Irish situation in the South really. It is another version of a similar situation, of people who had large houses and estates, who ruled, or have been dominant, being suddenly dislodged, or gradually dislodged from their position. And especially Ireland and the South seem to me, from my reading too, as it were, colonies. They had known defeat. There had been large estates or plantations and their capital disappeared year after year. They say if you leave your capital still, it dies away in three to nine years.

B.F.:Having no capital...

V.S.P.: Nor I! (laughter), but I am fascinated by the theory. One of the best Anglo-Irish writers, Elizabeth Bowen, was herself the daughter of a colonial Irish family who became extremely poor in the south of Ireland, not so far from Limerick. It was a time when one met plenty of these people and their manners were delightful, they were very amusing, they were intelligent, but they were quite clearly crumbling as a social element.

B.F.:How would that lend itself to the short story form?

V.S.P.: Well, I would have thought that it lent itself because the novel depends enormously upon its sense of a stable social structure and the short story does not really depend on there being a social structure at all. Perhaps there is one of some sort, but it can direct itself to life outside the theoretical, or practical interest of the country. One of the problems I think that Chekhov had when he wanted to write a novel was that he did not quite have the breath for it: the society he lived in was despotic and anarchic. He had his opinions about it but that is another matter. He was detached from ideological politics.

B.F.: I think you quoted Frank O'Connor somewhere about saying that some of the Irish, perhaps not so much the AngloIrish, but the Catholic Irish, are in a similar situation — though looking from down up, rather than from up down —, but they live in a rather anarchic society.

V.S.P.: It is rather an anarchic society, yes. Or it was. I would have thought anyhow, there is a basic oral gift of story-telling in Ireland; in fact one might even go as far as to say it's their substitute for a morality, that's to say moral and ethical arguments soon turn into anecdotal and narrative ones. Telling a story as it were is partly a form of evasion, or it's a form of getting around serious difficulties by not propounding.

B.F.: Yes.

V.S.P.: I think the Irish particularly like their situations enlivened, whatever they are. In Britain there is on the whole, the general tendency to play down situations as much as possible. All countries have their hypocrisies.

B.F.: That's a good distinction.

V.S.P.: The thing we hate is situation. The Irish love situation (laughter).

B.F.: Some of the American Southerners I know do much the same thing. They like to sort of over-emphasize a situation, even one of their own. By exaggerating, or dramatizing it, it becomes something else. It no longer needs to be addressed.

V.S.P.: It becomes as it were a legend in the making. The other thing is there was at that time in Ireland, and I think there still is despite the pedantry, a very strong poetic gift. Sometimes just a mere ballad, at other times much more sophisticated, but it is there. The same gift exists in England but in an utterly different way; it comes out in quite a different form. But in Ireland it is very spontaneous, like Irish ballads. And as they sing it you feel that the ballad has come straight out of a lasting situation and the legend has grown around it.

B.F.: I'd like to ask you about each of these Irish writers, but that would take us too long.

V.S.P.: One thing that always struck me, if I may say so, about Liam O'Flaherty was a story of his in which — it's a summery day and it's by the sea and a butterfly's flying over the land, flying out to sea, and there it is going across the English Channel and you can see it for a long time and eventually it will disappear. Where does it disappear, does it cross the sea, does it fall down into the sea or what? The observer on the scene identifies himself as it were with the butterfly going across the sea. Of course it is a very slight idea but it's a very curious one, and a real one.

B.F.: What's the title of that story?

V.S.P.: I've forgotten. I think it appears in a book *The Tent*.

An english family

B.F.: To shift to something a little bit different as far as your early interest in the short story: one thing I noticed in reading especially your first volume of autobiography, almost all through it you speak in terms of oppositions, between the north and south in England, or between your mother and father, or between your father's family and your mother's family. Not only many of your own short stories, but one characteristic of the short story form itself may be this sudden sharp opposition between two forces that you have to work for in a novel over a long time...

V.S.P.: I think that sort of thing had a great influence on my story writing. It always has. There was a vast difference between my parents. My father came from Yorkshire and from village Yorkshire at that, and my mother — she was a Cockney came from round the corner in London here; she came from Kentish Town, she worked in a shop; and the difference between the very talkative and the totally restless Cockney, with his rather superficial wit and his local stories and general mixture of merriment and sentiment is quite different from the stolid yet passionate Yorkshireman who is tough and blunt and doubts words and is moralistic. My father was a very religious man, my mother — she'd belong to any religion you offered to her to keep you quiet (laughter). I think in the first long story I wrote you get that conflict. I went to Sicily and in Taormina I saw a lot of painters, painting little pictures for tourists, and I got fascinated by one of them and

he said it was so it could be put in a suitcase and this way it was an instant sale. And it became a kind of parable of the split between the artist and the businessman. That was the kind of thing which was really going on in my family because my father, although a businessman, and a religious man, had a certain degree of artist in him because he was a designer in the textile trade; he made all sorts of objects which were fashionable at that time but no longer are, and which showed a great deal of craftsman's skill, if not a pure artist's imagination. So in a way in that story it's reflected.

B.F.: There are also figures in your family past. I was thinking especially of your Uncle Arthur who seemed such a sceptical and strong-minded man, and in your own stories you yourself are very much interested in showing the limitations of your characters' beliefs or ideas which is something your Uncle Arthur would have enjoyed.

V.S.P.: I think, in the case of my Uncle Arthur, who is a very good example, he was just an ordinary working carpenter; he lived in York, and he was madly passionate about the famous cathedral. He knew every stone of it, measured the stones of it. He was a practical man but he had an extraordinary kind of semi-aesthetic gift, and similarly he loved everything in nature, but he did not stop at that. He would get on his bicycle and drive over to cliffs on the sea and dare himself to climb down the cliffs to collect birds' eggs. He had an absurd collection of bird's eggs — he would have filled this room — taken at the peril of his life and with a collector's care. He also collected insects, there were cases of every kind of known fly and irritant in English life at various stages. There they were in their cases, but he personally had obtained them. Well this is a kind of act of poetry, of folly and poetry in this otherwise practical carpenter, a poor man too. On the other hand, one other thing which has never ceased to surprise me, he had read that extraordinary psychological classic of the 17th century, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which is the most extraordinary book of classical learning about neurosis and all that sort of thing, primitive psychology, early psychology. And he used to read this with absolute delight, with great pleasure — how much he understood I don't know.

B.F.: He would quote from it?

V.S.P.: He did quote from it, yes. And I think it was partly useful to him in his war with his brother-in-law, who was my grandfather, who was a Congregationalist minister, preacher, always referring to the Bible. Uncle Arthur used to say "Shut up! Burton, look it up in Burton" and he'd throw the Bible down. That sort of split in character is the thing that interests me, it still does.

B.F.: That's another opposition between someone who has a strong religious belief and the other — your Uncle Arthur or your mother —. Your Uncle Arthur would fight against it and your mother would try to avoid it, perhaps, but there was still that opposition.

V.S.P.: Absolutely so. There is still that opposition. It still fascinates me.

B.F.: You said once that your first story was a lament. You said most of your stories had been laments. What did you mean by that?

V.S.P.: The original thing which I wrote that about was a novel I started writing when I was ten; the germ of it was that I had read a long story by Washington Irving, a book for children about the Alhambra, and it was republished in a magazine with pictures. I read this and it gripped me completely and I decided I must write a novel about the recapture of Granada. I knew nothing about it at all except what I had read and very rapidly, like any schoolboy writer, I was longing to describe the battle. And I thought, "Oh, God, when all these men have been killed, what's going to happen"? I supposed I

must get some of them wounded and call for ambulances, but there were no ambulances; and so the women would come and look for their dead husbands, and then they'd break into lamentations. The word “lamentations“ impressed me very much and, in fact, I suppose, by transposition later on in life. I came to realize that people are always in a state of regret, or they are lamenting that such and such a thing did or did not happen. In small ways — I don't mean they are tearing their hair, but there is a split of sadness in life, a feeling of loss very often.

B.F.: In most of your stories?

V.S.P.: I am very conscious of that, yes.

Early influences

B.F.: I'd like to ask a little more about the first short stories you read. You said that in Dublin you read D.H. Lawrence and Joyce's *Dubliners*.

V.S.P.: Yes... yes, I read them, and I also read an English writer who is now rather forgotten but who was an extremely gifted writer of stories, in a very small compass, a man called A.E. Coppard. I admired his stories enormously. And in fact I used to know him, when I was living in the country. He was a nearby neighbour. And he was a very strange man; he was a warehouse-man's clerk or something like that who had decided to be a writer, so he had gone out and lived in a shed in the woods in Buckinghamshire, entirely on his own, with no sanitation and his drinking water from a well, in a shallow well in the earth. And he was a natural perfectly spontaneous man, not muddle-headed he was absolutely clear-headed. I don't think he had any views about life in general, any kind of intellect, but he had a marvellous appreciation of the instant; he could describe a squirrel very well, he could describe a game-keeper, he could describe a couple of old farmers arguing about whether, beef is better than veal to eat, or what pork is like, and things like that. He had a great decorative sense of comedy. He was unfortunately, when I look back upon it, a rather folkish writer; he came at a period when the peasantry were dead really and they only existed in pockets in England, in little places, and their traditional customs by that time had almost gone. It was when suburbia spread out and the countryside died. That curious old England went out. Another writer who was very good, in the same way, in his early stories, who came later, was H.E. Bates. He wrote very well, very good English, had a good style, but was also brief.

PH.S.: How old were you when you were reading these writers?

V.S.P.: Well, I suppose when I was in my twenties, I should think, when I came back from France. Because when I was in France I read simply nothing but French literature, French and Russian. I didn’t read any Russian stories, but I did read a lot of French stories; I read Maupassant of course and many others. And when I came back to England — in fact I was rather too foreign when I came back — I was terribly soaked in French things and literature and language. It was very hard for me even to get French out of my head, and to be able to write English.

PH.S.: Do you think you may owe anything to Maupassant, for instance?

V.S.P.: Well I think any short story writer does for one or two of his stories. I think he's bound to interest, especially the river stories, the boating stories of the river Seine. His style is very limpid; he was after all taught by Flaubert. And so he is, at that stage, a model. Any young writer is bound to turn to him for a period.

At ease with the short story

PH.S.: Now, may we turn to your success, your being hailed as one of the masters of the short story, and also you have been one of the most successful I would say from the public's point of view. What are the reasons for this success both with the critics and the public? Were they the same?

V.S.P.: I think the public has come on rather more slowly. I think the critics were first, really. Many of my best early short stories I couldn't get published anywhere which seems to show there was not a public for them. A story like "Sense of Humour" which made me as it were tremendously admired by a small circle of people who knew. But up to then I'd never been able to find anyone to publish it. It was completely incomprehensible to them. I think the critics were the first. I suppose the critics really tended to be my contemporaries, probably the same age as myself.

PH.S.: I wondered whether the reason for your success was the great variety of subjects you were able to treat?

V.S.P.: I think this is undoubtedly true. I've led a pretty restless life which is rather good for short story writers. And in that way one collects a good many subjects; and I think I've had a strange passage through society itself. I've been in almost any class of society. I mean I've found myself in it by accident for some reason or other, and I think I've had a journey through the English class system in a way, a more amusing one than most people, but still... I think also I have a rather ironical comic sense of life, and in fact that is an important point to me: I've always thought that the comic is really an aspect of the poetic. It is the sister of the poetic quality. And certainly my early writing — out of those Irish influences — was a strongly poetic, indeed sometimes overpoetic and the comic is the basic thing there. My fundamental view about the story is that it begins as a poetic insight, and that it is also a way of seeing through a situation, a "glimpse through" as someone has said in which you are in fact writing something perhaps like a short poem. I think the best examples of the short story in this sense are the sonnets of Shakespeare. Each sonnet is an intricate piece of poetry, but at the same time it is "a glimpse through" the life, a situation, the instance of feeling that he is evoking. It's more than an impression of surface. It cuts deeper than that.

PH.S.: Do you write easily, does it come easily to you?

V.S.P.: No, not very easily. I make innumerable false starts. If I make a good start, then suddenly I get stumped. As Chekhov said: "the middle is the difficulty." I don't know how to go on. Or I don't know how to make the transition from this scene to the next scene. Things like those are things that are difficult for a short story writer, generally because he has too much piled up inside him, and doesn't know how to distribute it. Then I find I have to put it down and go back to look at it. And then I somehow see what I've got to do next. And when the story's done it's generally a failure towards the end of it. It's going downhill fast. And I must now try to control it. So I write most stories three or four times over. I don't think I've ever just dashed off a short story. It takes me quite a considerable time. I think very often the end of the story is something totally different. For example, I wrote a story called "Neighbours" about two years ago. I wanted to write a story about a woman's hairdresser who lived in London and went to work in a big shop in Piccadilly. I imagined this man, and I knew he was perpetually complaining about how people really traded on him in one way or another, how he was

always called in to help in awkward situations and so on. I also noticed that he was a man who like myself didn't take a bus to the office. He walked all the way, from one end of Kensington right across the parks into Piccadilly. But he was also an ardent window-box gardener; knew a great deal about plants. All these pieces of information came into his character and I thought it would be a good subject. I began to see, of course he's gardening, he's gardening for women's hair. This sort of symbolism gripped me for a time, but I was over-loading it in the story. So I put the story aside, and then I suddenly realized — he had been talking about difficulties with his neighbour, a very boring woman who lived below him in her flat. That's another incident in the story —. I went away to Cornwall and I suddenly realized, my God! this is the place to put him. Let's take him away from his London place. And then I had the notion that he should meet this woman whom he dislikes, down there. He's staying at the same hotel. And then I had the sort of thing I wanted to write about. And so I had to scrap a lot of my verbiage, and come down to the main thing. And the main thing simply was — having had a very trying time with this lady — he hears from her that she's leaving her flat — she's married somebody down in the country — he'd been longing to avoid her and now he's terribly upset that she's now gone and he's got nothing to complain about. This important aspect of life is gone. And it was only when I went down to Cornwall that I realised I must reimagine him. I'd heard too much about him. That I think is one of the important things about writing stories: if somebody begins to tell you a story, you have to say "Shut up, stop it." I don't want to know what really happened. I must re-invent.

PH.S.: So it's the poetic influx?

V.S.P.: The poetic influx is absolutely at the heart of it, I'm sure.

PH.S.: Speaking about your method of working, I was struck by a sentence you use in one of your prefaces, you speak of "boiling down a hundred pages into twenty or thirty." Is that what you actually do? (laughter).

V.S.P.: Well I think I actually do. Sometimes I've noticed that the story which perhaps runs from about fifteen to twenty pages, I look at the manuscript of it and I find I've got versions about *that* high. I've always been rather ashamed of that because I thought it shows how stupid I am. But I remember reading the memoirs of Babel, you know, the Russian. He wrote *The Red Cavalry*, a brilliant post-revolutionary. He was involved in the civil war after the Revolution and he's a marvellous laconic short story writer. Many of his stories are not more than three pages long. They're quite astonishing. Somebody was interviewing him and he came into the room and they found a pile of papers about a foot high; and Babel said, in a slightly nervous exhibitionist way: "that's my last short story of three pages." You do have to cut down, cut down, cut down. With your writing a narrative story of any kind it always seems to you first of all that every event has equal importance, that every bit of it ought to have three sentences to it; when sometimes three words is quite enough.

PH.S.: Well, I was wondering about that because sometimes I feel that some of your stories look like extracts from what might have been novels. Do you sometimes have this feeling that what you're writing might be developed into a novel or be part of a novel as well as be a short story?

V.S.P.: I believe I don't think that really because when I wanted to write short stories and the publisher said he would not publish them unless I would write a novel, I was appalled because I had no idea how to construct a novel. So I read dozens of novels to see how you wrote a novel and I got more and more confused. I did manage to write one

long slightly anecdotal story which was superficially, shall we say, the plan for a novel which I managed to turn into an apparent novel, but after that I was beginning to write novels in order to please this publisher, and ones which were certainly quite well written but they had no success. I found that really: short stories were much better. I'd much sooner write them. I have written, I suppose, two novels which are quite good. One has been republished lately: *Dead Man Leading*. And I also wrote *Mr. Beluncle* which is a transformed autobiography. These did succeed. I don't think my novels are very good. No one ever seems to mention them; I would not be surprised if some people thought them unreadable...

PH.S.: Going back to what Ben was saying a moment ago: I was struck by the opening sentence of your Living Novel when you complain of having read too many novels when you were young. Why is that? Why do you think it was wrong to read so many novels?

V.S.P.: Well I don't think I really did think that but I was always told so. I was brought up at the age when people tried to stop you reading novels. I was a voracious reader. I would not say I had read the whole of Walter Scott but I had read a good half of him by the time I was sixteen. And I had read the whole of Thackeray, most of Dickens and was on to Balzac and Tolstoy. I suppose it incited me to wish I could do that; but the labour in front of me seemed preposterous and enormous: how on earth shall I ever learn to be able to construct an edifice! I think for example in the Twenties (when I grew up) the people who distinguished themselves as novelists at that time had not read very much because they hated Victorian literature while I for instance was soaked in it. There was a revolt against the traditional English novel in general and its particular values and so on. My reading of French novels and Spanish novels liberated me from the enormous, rather crushing moral power of the Victorian novel. I don't think so now but that's what I thought at the time (laughter).

Hearing the tune

PH.S.: When you say that you have occasional difficulties in writing, does that mean that a number of your short stories were not completed or not proposed for publication?

V.S.P.: Yes, some I scrapped or some I kept and read years later and thought "Good Heavens I know how to do this now." I know now how right Laurence Sterne was when he said that one cannot write until one "hears the tune in one's head." That's particularly true of short story-writers. You don't want an awful lot of facts, you don't want particularly an idea, but what you really want is to hear the tune of the first sentence and the note you wish to prolong. That's the thing to wait for.

PH.S.: There are certainly many young writers who get in touch with you and ask for your advice. What would you say are the main dangers for a young story writer, the main causes of failure?

V.S.P.: I would have thought all sorts of wrong emphases in the writing. Poor slack English is a very common thing among...: when you're very young and write sentences which seem to hang like laundry on the line. It seems all right, but it is not all right (laughter). Also, much too much explicitness is a bad thing. There is no need to describe everything that goes on at the table where the family is sitting. There are certain things you should pick out. You should find ways of describing, say a street like this — just to get it in a sentence or two. You should also have a much better ear for ordinary speech than is common. That I do feel very strongly, because a lot of people, young writers,

don't know how people speak. They give them written sentences to say instead of spoken sentences. Beware sentences that explain too much. A story must never explain, it must enact and suggest.

B.F.: Did you practice taking down speech? I know you took notes when you were in the Appalachians.

V.S.P.: Yes, I did. I had a mania for taking a notebook with me and writing down every sentence that I could. I did it for years. I have stopped that now. Perhaps it is a bad thing; perhaps I should start again. But I have a trained memory for any kind of phrase, anything heard in a shop or in a train. A phrase was often more important to me than a sentence.

I think that question of speech is very important for young writers. Chiefly for the reason that people are not *writing* when they speak.

Short-story characters

PH.S.: Now speaking about your characters. In your novel *Dead Man Leading* you give the definition of what is the character of a bad novel, "the character who's got inextricably confused with the character of the author"...

V.S.P.: Yes, that's true.

PH.S.: Does that apply to the short story?

V.S.P.: I would think it does. The author may have a character in his head, but I think he ought to be able to describe it without being too intricate about it. But, in general, I think the characters need to be liberated from their authors. That I think is important. There is a certain kind of first novel in which the hero is only too obviously a projection of the author in more favourable circumstances than in real life.

PH.S.: Still is not there a fair amount of autobiographical elements in your stories?

V.S.P.: Oh, a great deal but transformed or filtered.

PH.S.: But that does not interfere?

V.S.P.: That does not interfere at all, because to make things true they have to be made unlike yourself, they must appear not to be your view of them. You have to liberate your characters from yourself. You mustn't hang to them like the ghost at the feast. The ghost must be absent. They have to appear to be entirely on their own. I think it would be very difficult for me to write a portrait of myself. In fact I don't know where I would begin and indeed if I tried to put myself in a novel, or indeed in a story, I might put a tiny section of myself because it represented something in the story, but not otherwise.

PH.S.: Do you think that in your stories you have room to develop a true character, do you think the characters of a short story have the same vital energy as the characters in a novel? Have they got the same requirements as far as the writer is concerned?

V.S.P.: They have a very different requirement. For instance, a full-length portrait in a novel by Tolstoy of Prince Andrew may only appear in a novel. It is intricately examined. It is examined morally, socially, with a good deal of detail, because such writers are generally describing not simply individuals but a state of society in which they live. And doing so, how they evolve from this society, or escape from it.

Now the short story writer only does that by indication and if he finds that a character is being, shall we say, ruined by society or by his social upbringing, he has to find a way of demonstrating this in one or two incidents, or in some reflection. He has to develop a certain sleight-of-hand. He's constantly reducing the size of the field he's got in front of him, but he's increasing the intensity. I think intensity is something very marked in the best short stories. They're not superficial in just hitting upon one or two things. They've chosen those things for a purpose which runs clean through the story. And which sharpens it...

PH.S.: In your view, is the character the center of the short story or is he only a medium through which something else is represented?

V.S.P.: Well I think he's both that really. He is a character in the story, but also he represents things in the society around him. The ordinary human being has not got on his shoulders the burden of the novelist. He's got a greater burden, that of living (laughter). And so therefore he can be known for the aspects of this burden. For example, since it was something I wrote fairly recently, this question of the hairdresser. He's very comfortable in his flat. It's all rather decorative. He's a sort of homosexual. Anyway he is a man who's not much interested in women. He does his own cooking, and everything is absolutely just so. Being visited by a woman who is not like that, who is a widow and has got endless stories of her woes and difficulties and all the rest of it, whenever he meets her here or wherever she goes, he has an awful feeling "My God, let's keep away from ordinary life. Really she is a sample, she's human, she's awful." His feeling is that of somebody who cannot stand the boredom of any aspect of ordinary life. Yet, on the other hand, will go to enormous fuss, if anyone drops something on his sofa, some wine or something that spoils the velvet, he'll go all over London trying to find something that really cleans velvet (laughter).

I remember Arnold Bennet who was a writer I very much admired in many of his remarks about writing. He talks about one of his characters towards the end of a story as having to "bear the exquisite burden of life." Well I think that phrase is one I do rather feel. Only when I say "burden" I don't mean something that is really bowing me down but it is something I had to deal with. But I think the dealing with it should be exquisite, I mean to say it should be more delicate, perhaps more perceptive. I'm not very keen on a generalizing morality.

PH.S.: If characters are not completely developed in a short story, would you agree that they may be more like types than actually live characters. The French academic Alain Theil, whom you remember, said that he had found only ten types of female characters, such as the light woman, the unsatisfied woman, the deserted woman often divorced and so on... Would you agree with a definition like that or would you think it is unfair?

V.S.P.: It's a generalisation which may have a certain amount of truth but most of the novelists' or the short story writers' duty is to destroy generalization. Supposing I am faced with writing about one of his types, I should have to see that she is not a type. I should have to contradict the view. He might still say you're writing about a "light woman" but "you have never seen a light woman like this before" would be my answer. All human beings are different and I want to see the distinctions. There is something that takes them outside the generality.

One of the things that has always impressed me about Dickens — sometimes I have been compared, sometimes wrongly I think — people say his characters are done in caricature: I think that is totally untrue, almost totally untrue. Especially in the English

characters. A large number of English people you see walking up and down the street are acting a part. They are concealing themselves from everyone by extraordinary acts of behaviour. Strange verbiage comes out of them, certain fantasies come flying out of them, which is part of their character. They see themselves curiously, I think, on some kind of private stage. And in England particularly where the sense of belonging to a society, where social pressures are strong, we tend to escape to our private stage. The sense of one's obligation to society, almost in any class under any circumstance, or one's role in society, is very strong indeed. But of course it's an unbearable burden. What you have, there's still yourself, this you are but up to a point. Now what do you live by? You live not by that, but possibly by some fantasy view of yourself or by some aspects of yourself which you hide from society, which you cherish, and large number of people are always seeing themselves — you see them in Camden-Town all day long — as being some one else. There used to be a newsagent here, a rather mocking character, and he would have a chat with you, and then he would suddenly put on a different voice and say: "Don't call us, we'll call you." He saw himself as a film producer sending an applicant away. All you were doing was buying a paper from him (laughter). I could see somehow or other he would assume that, instead of being behind a counter, he ought to be sitting in a cane chair in a studio in front of people asking for parts. He was exactly like that. I think many people are adjacent to life, not drowning in it.

Importance of the plot

PH.S.: Would you agree with the idea that because the short story is short it's easier for its authors to deal with characters whose personalities are fairly simple or who have strong characteristics to be easily...

V.S.P.: That is perfectly true, yes. But even a simple character may have a moment of sudden drama in his daily life. H.E. Bates has one about a peasant who, as he ploughs a field, suddenly gets a message that his son had died. What the ploughman's "character" is, we don't know. We don't know what he is. We don't know what his character is. He is a ploughman. We can guess what a labouring ploughman's life is like. We can see he is a hard working man, that he is devoted to his job, and all the rest, but he can be made to seem a very powerful example of human being, of a humble human being with no characteristics except that he goes to work. Yet suddenly this blow occurs to him in the course of an ordinary day's work. In an ordinary day there is this devastating message which he will have to live through as the day passes. That day will be one of the dramas in the life of an ordinary man. The Russian writers have had the sense of the natural yet inexorable flux of the day passing through ourselves. That itself disposes of the need of plot or the elaboration of character. As that excellent critic John Bayley has said about Russian writing in general: for the Russians "the doors and windows of the human house are wide open; their minds are living in the open...," in the passing hour. The story is, in essence, a poem.

PH.S.: Well you have introduced my next point speaking about the unnecessary plot, the limited importance of the plot. When reading your stories, I have some difficulty in deciding how important or unimportant the plot is for you. Is the plot of a story something that worries you?

V.S.P.: No, not at all. I have to know what the beginning, middle and end is, if you mean that. But as far as an intrigue is concerned, or a complicated intrigue, no, I'm much more interested in the character, whose personality takes over. They certainly may get

into trouble. I occasionally can think of plots which would turn them into anecdotes, I'm not very clever at that. In fact, I rather shy away when I see an anecdote coming up. They are too easy to invent, I try to avoid it. I don't say that I always do, I always feel that an anecdote part should be watched very carefully and, as much as possible, the end of the story should lie open, so that you feel, that your people have got to go on living when the story is over. However it is not necessarily so. Large numbers of good short stories have had rather tricky endings.

PH.S.: In fact there is a variety in your short stories?

V.S.P.: Yes, Yes.

PH.S.: Some of them have a very clearly defined plot, for instance"The Necklace" or "Blind love..." but if you take "The Two Brothers" it seems the story might have ended without a conclusion perhaps...

V.S.P.: Yes, but it is an early story and happened to be "true."

PH.S.: ... One of the two brothers leaves but he might have continued to live next door. Does that bother you?

V.S.P.: No, it doesn't bother me. "The Necklace" I wrote as an exercise because I thought I had lost the ability to write a story. I was working on *The New Statesman* at the time and I was awfully busy. And I suddenly realized that I was running short of short stories, and I thought I'd better try and do something about it. And I remembered that Henry James had decided that he must really write a "necklace" story. The "necklace" story of Maupassant is the classic model and an astonishing number of writers have turned to that story and said "I must write a "necklace" in a different way." And so I did it for that reason: it did release me.

PH.S.: But still you think for instance that a nice little twist at the end of the story may be a good trick: I am thinking for instance of "The Wheelbarrow;" suddenly we discover what the man's real interest is, but is it for you merely a technical trick or...

V.S.P.: Not at all. It is a surprise, but it occurred to me in real life. I was giving up my house in the country, I decided that I couldn't be bothered to take the wheelbarrow with me, so I gave it to a local man who was the gardener. By this time I knew enough about country people to realize that whatever situation they got into, the "things" were the important thing to them. I knew the man coveted my wheelbarrow. It was natural for him to go for the useful object rather than for something else. Covetous self-interest is traditional of course. But I didn't think of it particularly as a trick but it certainly is an irony. That story was particularly interesting for me to write because it is about a Welsh miner. I do know the Welsh rather well. And when I read some of my stories I very often can remember from what particular real instant in life — or something like it — any sentence came from. And I've often thought — supposing I lost my memory — I could always go back to my stories and find the whole geography of my life, the travelling, friendships, goodness knows, in random detail, going back even into childhood. They don't belong to the period of the story necessarily. They sometimes go right back to childhood. I think childhood is an enormous source, the real well from which literature really comes.

PH.S.: Well my last question because we can't go on too long...

V.S.P. (laughter): Have another drink!

Of trickery in the short story

PH.S.: Is not there a danger, many people would say, of the short story becoming artificial with such components as the final twist, or the introduction of short bits of information at any point of the story that will serve to bring about the conclusion, or the necessary selection of components in which the role of the writer is too obvious? Do you think there is some truth in all that, that there is a danger for the short story?

V.S.P.: Well there's the same sort of danger really that there is in the novel on a larger scale. I think if you try to write short stories well, you try and evade those things. I mean they stick out a mile when you read them through to you. And you think "No, that is really not so, not like the life I'm trying to put in." Nevertheless, there are a vast number of anecdotal stories which are like that. I think actually there is a public taste for the anecdote, that is much stronger than it is for the story which is not an anecdote. Maupassant, Maugham, even Chekhov sometimes, sinned in this way. One must of course distinguish between the "trick" ending and the "closed" ending in which the story has a fitting end. I think we've had far too many anecdotal stories. The twist can be avoided entirely by making it spring from the characters themselves. The finest stories have a natural, even intense musical power. I would have thought the number of people who like non-anecdotal short stories is the number of people who read poetry. One must distinguish between irony of life and mere wit. Experience often tells us that the comic and the dire are often opposite sides of each other, yet somehow united. We laugh and cry at the same time. Information is very bad in the short story. But I think there are the people who like it, they don't like stories to be over too quickly! People like to read novels as if they were getting into a nice hot bath you know. Lolling about in it. They like to "lose themselves." Whereas in the best stories you find yourself. I think that is undoubtedly true. The best stories wake you up. Even if they wake you up to preposterous things, they do wake you up.

PH.S.: If it does not wake you up, it is a bad short story?

V.S.P.: It is a bad short story, that is it! I don't object to a certain amount of trickery, life is often bizarre and has its own wit. One of my "trick" stories, as you might recall, is the story I wrote about a dentist. This is straight from life. I didn't have any trouble at all in this. It was told to me by my dentist as he was struggling with my tooth. I knew him well and knew certain things about his life. He was a born non-penitent, but he needed to confess. He was a tremendous pursuer of young girls to whom he wrote poems. And in his surgery he had a file full of carefully type-written poems — written in the manner of one or two modern American poets — long poems. He would dish these out to girls and read them to persons like me to see "What do you think about this one." "She was a goddess but she had feet of clay" (laughter). Then he became more confessional, describing how he ran off with his father's mistress: frightful troubles and all the rest of it. He even interpreted it as a "touch of the Oedipus complex." It is unbelievable but there it is. And the fact that he should tell the story is perfect, it ends with his own polite, professional words. His *own* trick — not mine. Very English. The only thing that I had to do was to write it entirely in his abrupt dialogue, so that this is not the impersonal voice of the author speaking to you, but it's the dentist himself. He read it a year later when it was published and congratulated me and hoped I got well-paid for it!

PH.S.: Well, as you said, short stories should wake people up: is it for that reason that very often they tend to deal with rather unusual or extreme situations or characters?

V.S.P.: That also happens, I suppose, but they don't always deal with such strange situations as my dentist. If you've got really extreme characters or strange situations, you must take care to be neutral. Strange situations are strange. It is one of the writer's duties to suggest the strangeness of ordinary life.

PH.S.: I was thinking of "The Satisfactory" for instance...

V.S.P.: "The Satisfactory" yes.

PH.S.: This exchange of sex and food during the war, the lady providing extra food and the man giving sex in exchange.

V.S.P.: That is a trick story, I think. Yet, I observed it in my daily visit to a restaurant where such a woman was feeding a man. There was a certain trade in food coupons during the war.

PH.S.: But is it not the extreme limit of something fairly usual... I mean it is usual to see a lady giving something nice to a man... but this is an extreme case, she hardly ate at all and he ate for two... (laughter).

V.S.P.: It seemed comical and yet passionate to me — *a trouvail*. I don't claim it is a great story; it is a little farce. I don't see why one should not be able to write all kinds of stories. I've often thought when recalling people's criticism of the early Chekhov — you know he wrote some hilarious short stories — that a writer who can write short stories is able to write any kind of story, and if he can he'd better. Because if he's going to write a trick story and it obsesses him, then he'd better do it, to get it out of his system.

What future lies ahead

PH.S.: My last question for a conclusion would be: what future do you see for the short story? It seems that people are, maybe, less interested in short stories than they used to be fifty years ago? Is the short story dying out, do you think?

V.S.P.: Well, the rise of the short story was due to the proliferation of magazines, monthly magazines, weekly magazines. People needed stories. Remember that novels, in the nineteenth century, were serialised month by month in magazines. Television is killing the magazines. It is very difficult to find any one to publish a short story. This won't stop stories being written. They do well in collections. But in Great-Britain a writer is paid very little for individual stories — far less than in America where the rewards have been far larger —. My two early stories "A Sense of Humour," and "The Sailor," I was paid £3 and £7 respectively, but they "made" my name. Had I been an American writer in my twenties I would have earned far more than that. I lived on literary journalism. So stories, the most important thing in my life, have had to take the back seat, in earning my living. But in the end, my collections of short stories have had enormous success in Germany, in the U.S., in Japan and in Great-Britain. I suppose it's the reward for having been paid very little at the start, but I don't know (laughter). Anyway that is how it is.

Television is the main enemy of all reading. People now are ceasing to read and certainly very few get the habit of reading in their childhood. In previous generations people read in their old age, because they had taken it up when they were children. Now children don't need to read a book.

You will say that television occasionally puts on a story for twenty minutes, isn't that a good idea? Well, they do that sometimes. But unfortunately the written short story is immediately distorted by television. It's rather like a novel being different when it's put on the stage. It's a different medium altogether. The radio is by far the best medium for stories: listeners are readers.

PH.S.: Have you had experiences with television?

V.S.P.: "Blind love" was done on television and some of it was rather well done. I watched it being made and they took a great deal of trouble. The only thing was that it was on a serious subject in which detail counts; on the screen it went at the speed of a horserace — a uniform speed. A short story does not go at uniform speed. It also changes direction. The television is very onespeed. If you went at the same pace you would be writing a novel.

Another of my television stories is "The Wedding." I was afraid of that being done because it had to take place in the real country, among real country people, farmers and so on And the television has had the habit of inventing a kind of standard English peasant type — people we always called "coming from Loamshire." I wouldn't have been able to bear this because I've known farmers very well indeed — in fact I've had them in my family and in my wife's family. Fortunately, the T.V. people took the story to a remote rural district in Yorkshire. Most of the actors were actual country men acting, and some came from that part of England. Their accents were true. There was not a touch of Broadcasting House in them. They spoke very naturally. They caught the note of frolic you need if you are going to describe a country wedding: the air of genial lust and general horseplay. The action of the story came to my mind from an actual wedding in which the young farmers had ropes tucked under their wedding clothes. The custom was to lasso some of the ladies like cattle which they manage very skilfully to do. The larding was rough but it was not detestable, it was human, even had an elegance. But they did it well, they didn't race it through, and they had a rather tricky subject because the rough farmer who was a rich widower (in my story) is determined to marry a country girl who was extremely well educated. In fact she teaches literature and is not a stuffy school Ma'am at all. She's a publishable literary critic. Improbable? Not at all. Read D.H. Lawrence. I know more than one instance. One has to make this possible. I think I know how to do that. I think they didn't quite, but they had a splendid girl for doing it, and I think they did it pretty well, but again it is the speed that seems to be wrong. I don't know, perhaps you could read that story in much less than half an hour — and the television was half an hour — perhaps you can read my story in a quarter of an hour, but that quarter of an hour would seem very long.

PH.S.: So you would not advise young short story writers to address themselves entirely to the T.V.? They should continue to write...

V.S.P.: I think they must write... I think T.V. would mislead them... still, it depends... A good many people with talent are very open to experiment in new forms. Most of the good writers have been daring. They've taken risks, they constantly want to refresh their talents. Perhaps television will catch up with us. It is still in its adolescence. In the meantime we survive because there are still addicted readers who like to reflect as they read, and not merely to see instantly and to forget.

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